

A 16 YEAR OLDS ADVENTURE ON SANTA CRUZ ISLAND..... 1949

It was Summer of 1949, the last year of the 40's. World War II was drifting away into history and Randolph E. Siple turned 16 on June 5, 1949. He was a young high school student living in Sacramento at the time. His mind was occupied with all the things 16 year olds bother themselves with. At the time, this young boy did not know that the legacy of the war would become an adventure for him in and around Santa Cruz Island. Nor did he know of deeper roots that would connect him to the Island.

Many years later, his mother confided in him that he had been conceived on the beach, along the shores of Carpinteria. This small town was located just across the Channel waters from Santa Cruz. He certainly could not have known at that young age that he would finish his life on his ranch overlooking Carpinteria and Santa Cruz Island. Every day and evening of his later years, he would look directly at the Island and remember. Those crazy and un-lazy days in 1949.

Santa Cruz Island is one of several mountain tops which rise above the Pacific Ocean, just 20 or so miles West of the California Coast. It is the largest of those Mountainous Islands. In 1949, it was mostly owned by the Stanton Family. They farmed the Island and ran cattle upon its rough terrain. The Island has one significant valley. At the widest section of that valley, the farm buildings existed. The valley emptied out onto the Eastern side of the Island, just about in the middle.

No, Santa Cruz is not a tropical paradise. It is like the nearby California Coast, semi-arid with indigenous trees and shrubs. Because of its isolation from other land masses, it had, over the years, developed some species peculiar to the location. Interbreeding seems to bear out Darwin's theory. The most notable is the small Island Fox.

There were a few springs of fresh water, but the streams ran only after a rainfall. There were no lakes or reservoirs. Where the valley meets the coast, a small cove or bay had developed. It was not a true harbor, but offered some

protection to small craft. That protection was due to most of the weather coming from the Northwest, The Island mass provided a weather break.

Off the nearby beach, was an old pier, build by the Stantons. This was the typical wooden construction with pilings. The purpose was obviously to bring supplies and take produce (mostly cattle) over to the mainland. Just inland, in a vale, existed a two story adobe building that had been abandoned and neglected.

Daily life on this quiet island was mostly created by Mother Nature herself. Certainly the most exciting event, in those days, was to move cattle down to the pier and drive them out into the waters of the bay to the side of a large boat. There, the men would put slings under the cattle stomachs and hoist them up into the boat. Of course, this would take quite some time and was done for just a few cows , say 20 to 30. All this excitement, shouting, grunting, and horsemanship would only be done a few times a year. Most of the time, this bay called Prisoner's Harbor, was like the rest of the place, quiet and serene. This was about to change.

At 2545 San Fernando Road in Los Angeles, existed a construction company. Its name was that of its creator and owner, Edward R. Siple...ERSCO. In those days, a construction company did everything. It had heavy equipment to move dirt and dig ditches, put up large buildings, shops to build cabinets, do electrical work, plumbing, you name it. If a Job required a variation, the company adapted. The scene you see today of a jillion subcontractors working for a general contractor did not exist. Today, the general contractor is more like a broker. Back then, they did everything. Unions would soon break up these types of companies...but for the time in 1949 we are considering here, Edward R. Siple Company was a jack of all the trades.

Because of a broken family, Randolph did not live with his father, but with his mother in Sacramento. Summers were the times he spent with his father and learned the trades as well. His father was a good teacher.

About the same time, The United State Navy, was developing Rockets at Point Mugu on California's Coast. This facility was next to Port Hueneme, a deep water port lying over the deepest part of the Santa Clara Valley as it emptied into the ocean. The development of Rockets was relative new. Interest in this type of

weapon was certainly caused by World War II and the many weapons it developed. Both Mugu and Hueneme face Santa Cruz Island or it faces them, depending on your point of view.

The Navy had developed a system of tests, shooting these rockets out into the Pacific Ocean. As the rockets shot up and out, they passed Santa Cruz Island's Southern end. To be able to study these rockets, the Navy decided to take some of the land on Santa Cruz and build a facility to monitor the rockets' performance as they went West Ward Ho. To move quickly, the Navy would hire private companies to make this happen.

The first part of the plan was going to the Island and locating a building site on the Southern portion of the Island. For the contractor, the only reasonable way to get to it was to use Prisoners Harbor. This meant the first task was the construction of a base camp and a road (called Little Burma Road) to the Navy's site. Then the buildings on the site itself had to be built and the area generally policed to make it habitable. Of course, to do this meant one had to bring all the equipment and supplies necessary to make it happen. There would be no running to the local hardware store for the part you forgot and certainly no place to order concrete and have it delivered.

Edward Siple, Randolph's father, learned of the project by reading the Green Sheet. This paper was part of the construction industry and published all manner of work and projects others wanted done. Contractors would then select the work they wanted to bid on. Once the selection was made, the project manager would give to the contractor the plans and specifications for the project. From those, the contractor would bid. Edward read of the Navy's project in this manner.

Certainly building things on Islands was not something Edward had done before, but the adventure of it excited him. Not only that, but he loved the challenge and believed he could out bid everyone else. He decided to bid. Now, the problem all bidders faced was getting everything you needed assembled and placed on the Island. Certainly this would discourage many bidders because they simply would not be able to figure it out. More than that, most would have to depend on commercial boats and ports through which the material would be delivered. At the time, the Ports were difficult to deal with because of the

Stevedore Unions. They held a strangle hold on the movement of all objects. This meant even more contractors would avoid the bid. It was just too much of an unknown.

Ed Siple just considered all these problems his cup of tea. He loved the competition. He placed his bid and was by far the lowest bidder. The bid was \$421,000 and the project was to take 10 months. At the inflated dollars of 2015, the price would have been \$4,500,000. What set his bid apart from all the other bidders was his decision to create his own fleet of water craft to get everything there and to continue the supply for the long months the job would take. He received the contract and then the hard part began. How to get there and get back easily and at a low cost. How does one create a fleet?

The key to this transportation problem was World War II and its aftermath. When the war came to an end, the various services were stockpiled with all manner of surplus. Edward Siple saw that surplus as a bonanza. He began buying trucks and trailers etc. from the Army. He bought from the Corp of Engineers four D7_[1] Caterpillar tractors, a motor grader and several pull dirt scrappers. But his fleet of water craft - he bought from the Navy. Down in San Diego, the Navy had stockpiled thousands of landing craft and related equipment. Most was brand new and never used. My father found the fleet of three boats he would need. Two LCM's and one LCVP. These were the smaller landing craft that generally were carried on large ships, lowered over the side, and then loaded with what needed to be sent to the beaches. LCM means Landing Craft Mechanized and LCVP means Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel (mostly Personnel). The LCM was twice as large as the LCVP. It had two GM Diesels, with two rudders and screws, whereas the LCVP had one each. Neither had sleeping quarters or even a place to brew a cup of coffee. Spartan pretty well describes them.

Randolph was continuing school in Sacramento, unaware of all these goings on. As soon as Summer vacation started, Randolph got aboard the Southern Pacific "Day Light" out of Sacramento and arrived in Glendale, where his father lived. Just about the first words out of his father's mouth were that Randolph would not be staying at his usual place of abode with his father's sister, Dorothy, but would be staying with another Sister, Betty, and her Husband, Brown Hamilton.

The reason was soon to be told and the following is Randolph's story:

My father, Edward, then explained the job for the Navy and the need to obtain the fleet. He asked me to join my Uncle Brown Hamilton and Uncle Gordon (Edward's brother) and travel to San Diego. There the boats would be obtained and brought North. Keep in mind, I had never sailed a boat nor had I ever run one with a motor. Within days I would be 16. Just so you know, Hamilton was the Chief Mechanic for Edward. Gordon, was a construction supervisor, who just happened to have some knowledge of boats, since he lived in Newport/Balboa area and owned a small motor boat. What all three had was the blessing of very good common sense.

Within days, we threesome drove to San Diego and contacted the Navy surplus office. They took the three of us to the vast boat bone yard. There, Hamilton and Gordon examined about 20, selecting the two LCM's they felt were the best. The LCVP was an afterthought. It was bought but, because of its size, would be trucked to Los Angeles. The LCM's probably could have been trucked or taken by rail but time was of the essence. Also, remember trucking was a smaller affair than it is today.

The Navy then loaded the two LCM's on a special trailer they had and transported them to San Diego Naval Yards. There, the two boats were lifted from the trailer and placed down to the water level. These docks were made for ocean going vessels so you can imagine that the LCM's looked pretty small, way down about 20 feet from eye level. Miracles of Miracles - they floated. All the ropes to tie them up had to be purchased, as well as batteries, oil, and fuel. All small vessels, in those days, had to have at least one tall white lite. That also had to be bought and affixed. We stayed at a small hotel where we were able to leave the truck and obtain transportation to the boats.

Very early in the morning, the two boats were started and everything checked out. Off with the ropes and away we went. Hamilton and Gordon in one boat, with a cot in the hold, and a nervous 16 year old in the other. The learning process was quick. Gordon was the navigator and Hamilton and myself the operators. The two boats went out of San Diego Bay and, once in the Pacific, turned North. Our first stop would be Newport, with an overnight at Gordon's home. Now, you have to keep in mind the boats' paint job was at least 6 years

old and very rusty looking. Thankfully, the filters had been changed and the motors performed as expected.

Late in the evening, the two boats arrived in Newport and tied up to some buoys Gordon believed were for our use. A boat taxi took us away and returned us the next morning. Problem. The boats were gone. After much to do, we learned the Harbor Master (you have to know that Newport Harbor is the home of very expensive yachts) considered our boats derelict and impounded them out of sight. Well, this took a day and considerable money to retake possession. So much for Gordon's intimate knowledge of his home port.

The next leg was to go from Newport and go as far as we could. We got a late start. It was night time as we neared the entrance to San Pedro Harbor. I steered by following the light on the first LCM. That was about all I could see. There was a light haze on the water, much like a light fog. Suddenly, the light on the first LCM stopped showing, and I went 150 % alert. As I did so, I became aware of a large white streak in the water ahead and then realized it was made by a very large Navy cargo ship of the same color as the haze. It cut right between the two LCM's and made no sounds. If it had a light, it just looked like a star to the small boats. All I could see was the white streak. I steered the boat hard to the right and was slightly caught in the wake of the big boat. I circled around and once again the light could be seen. It was traveling in circles, as the two Uncles were certain my LCM had been sunk. With great relief, the two boats continued North. The seas were moderate, but even so, the flat bottomed boats took a beating. The little stores of food and drink were soon depleted. No one, except Gordon, could sleep.

As the morning arrived, the shore became visible and one could follow where we were, more or less, as we traveled up the Coast to Port Hueneme. Upon arrival, the two boats were tied off at the Navy small boat landing and secured for their next use.

While the LCM's traveled up the coast, Edward Siple was having a very large barge in San Pedro loaded with all of the supplies and equipment needed for the first phase of construction on Santa Cruz. This very large wooden barge is difficult to imagine, but it was large enough to have stacks of cement, small buildings, trucks, tractors, kitchens, equipment to make sand and gravel etc. Other than its

crew and that of the tug boat that brought it, no one else was transported in this way.

Edward had also hired a large yacht named the Maripuna to take approximately 30 men and immediate supplies. This was loaded at the Port of Hueneme. The plan was that the barge would be beached at Prisoners Harbor at the same time the Maripuna arrived with the men needed to off load the barge. Remember the Barge was coming from Los Angeles and the Maripuna, the shorter distance, from Hueneme. The Maripuna looked good but soon its passengers were to find it was not up to the task.

The Maripuna was loaded up with most of the men sitting on the stern deck. Below decks were filled with food stuffs and the personal gear of each man. The yacht had gone about 10 miles from shore and the sea kicked up her heels with a brisk wind. The yacht, being heavily loaded, was riding the waves more deeply than she was designed. This caused the boards, of the lap construction, to leak water. Another thought is that she was riding just at the water line and somewhat below it, thus allowing the dryer and less saturated woods to interface with the Ocean. The Ocean won.

As the boat approached Santa Cruz Island, trouble began to appear by the numbers. The water in the bilges was rising and threatening the motor. The auxiliary pumps, hand operated, failed. The radio could not send, but only receive. My father and myself, plus one other young man, became a bail line. I stood in the floor of the boat and filled buckets which Edward took and handed to the younger man. He dumped the water over the side and the action was repeated. As the water rose, all the food stuffs came apart so that what had been loaves of bread floated and cans rolled out of their cardboard boxes only to be stepped on. Most of the labels came off and were tossed with the water. During this several hours ordeal, I learned a very good lesson of life. In crisis, do not expect most to help. If they cannot run, they will simply sit and let it happen. That certainly was the case in 1949. Only one other young man helped. Not even the captain was any help. He sat there crying, while his vessel's motor stopped running.

The boat drifted into the Southeastern cliffs of Santa Cruz. These are very high and generally, at high tide, show no beaches. It was getting dark and

certainly I was old enough to realize the boat could break up on the shore rocks and cliffs. The odds of any survivors was not good. My father and I moved to the bow of the boat to lift the anchor from its keep and attempt to anchor the boat short of destruction. There was a hole in the bow, from which the anchor chain and rope emerged. As it unraveled, it suddenly began to make some speed. I grabbed the rope as it began to finish its run. It pulled me over the side and my father grabbed my ankles and held me, while I held the rope. Slowly, he and I pulled the boat to the rope, gaining a bit of slack which we then tied on to a stanchion. The captain had never secured the anchor rope to the boat. Finally, the boat's anchor took hold. As the boat swung on its anchor, we could see the dark shapes of rocks protruding from the water, just feet from the stern. Because of the darkness, we believed danger was still close, so we pulled in more of the anchor rope to pull the boat a bit further from the shore line. The waves passing these rocks and sometimes breaking on them was a sight I shall never forget. Putting a steeper angle on the anchor rope and chain can undo the hold, so we did it with great care. Fortunately, we were successful and the boat held its position, not more than 10 feet from a large rock, that on low tide, we would have hit. Soon after and being exhausted, we fell asleep where ever we were. The weather was moderate.

With the coming of dawn, we were better able to see our position. It was not good, although we felt certain no submerged rocks would do us in. We had no way to signal except by flag and, of course, the Captain had none. We took a large piece of cloth and made a white flag. It was the best we could do. By Noon, no one had come by and we were busy building a raft of 5 gallon gas cans and spare wood. By this time, there were a couple of volunteers who agreed to help by paddling the raft to a landing place. The object was for them to get help. About an hour after they left, a fishing boat came by but ignored us. About an hour more, another came by and he did come to help us. His was not a large boat but the Captain knew what he was doing and he took the people off the boat in two trips, dropping them off at the pier in Prisoners Harbor.. I was in the first bunch. The Captain of the Maripuna was left alone. The fishing boat had already alerted the Coast Guard to come and tow him away. What personal effects could be salvaged were also taken.

Once we were on the land, all hands were put to unload the barge. At first, this was done with gangways down to the shore from the end of the barge. It

became dark very soon and fortunately part of its cargo included gas run lights that helped us see to unload. Part of the unloading included building a sturdy ramp to allow the trucks and tractors to be driven off. The barge was about 6 feet out of the water at the beach line. We brought a small pile driver to strengthen the old pier and build a float dock at its side. The unloading continued all night into the morning.

A small portable building was also off loaded and this became our Kitchen which was located beside the two story Adobe. The ground floor of the Adobe was cleared of debris and became our dormitory. Everyone slept like there was no tomorrow.

Sanitation, those first couple of days, was pretty primitive. The ranch hands helped us locate a spring (6 miles distant) and eventually we piped in running water. We did not use the plastic pipe of today, but used iron. Until then, we lived like the island fox. One of the things we did not have was toilet paper. It dissolved on the Maripuna. The first 5 to 6 days was taken up with building the base camp and making the Adobe usable and otherwise making life bearable. For those who love rough camping, this was perfect. I learned I did not care for that way of life. It just did not make common sense to me to live in danger all the time.

Part of the base camp was to build a sand and gravel plant in the stream bottom. This included a small crusher and conveyor belts. The raw gravel and stones were crushed and then separated into sand and gravel by heavy duty screens. The barge had brought plenty sacks of cement, so with water and the plant in operation we made concrete. Edward had brought trucks and tractors for these purposes. Our first construction was to enlarge the kitchen area and make a dining room. Second, but almost the same time, was the building of a community toilet with running water for showers, albeit a bit cold. A concrete slab worked wonders.

In the mean time I was taken back to Port Hueneme to bring one of the LCMs back to the Harbor. This began the two boats career of supply.

Once we could build something substantial, we were ready for the Burma Road. Our surveyors had already marked it out with stakes and flying bits of cloth. If you Google "Prisoners Harbor on Santa Cruz island", you will be able to

see the road. It is used today for general transport and for campers who can use a couple of camp grounds off its lead. I know this for a fact because Edward D. Siple, my son, the grandson of Edward, proposed to his girlfriend at one of these camps in 2012. She accepted and now they live at the family ranch, able to look at Santa Cruz every day. He had no idea his father and grandfather were principals in building that very road, until some 4 years later.

The little Burma Road is what the Los Angeles Times called it when they made a visit and did a spread on the project. The two roads had comparisons. The D7 tractors showed their true grit as they cut the road into the sides of the mountains and then over some gullies. Dynamite helped. It was here that I learned how to operate one of the former Army cats. When I was not busy with other duties, such as operating one of the LCM's, I was acting as a relief operator to push the road ahead. The motor grader did the fine tuning and the dirt movers were pulled by the D7's when needed to move a lot of dirt a distance. Bit by Bit the road was pushed through. Once it was roughed in, the finish work would come along in good time. After all we had to make a dirt pad for the Navy buildings. As soon as possible, the concrete mixer was moved from base camp to the new dirt pad. The buildings were surveyed in, the forms dug and made. After the Iron was placed, we poured the concrete to make the foundations. Except for the cement & iron all the product came from the Island. I was not there for most of the building construction. It was time to return to the mundane life of a high schooler in Sacramento.

Most of my Summer was spent running one of the LCM's from Port Hueneme to the beaches of Prisoner Harbor. At the Port, the Navy had a large ramp that could be raised and lowered depending on the deck to be loaded. In this way, equipment could be driven on the landing craft with its ramp lowered. My father got permission to borrow the ramp and that is how we loaded the LCM's for the trip to the island. Once we arrived, we beached the craft and off loaded them with tractors. Mostly what we carried were people and trailers. The tractor would back in, hook up on a trailer and away they would go. We would leave Santa Cruz about mid-day on Friday with personnel and any equipment to return. Once at Port Hueneme, we went directly to the ramp for off-loading and loading. This could take us into Saturday and most of the time did because of stuff arriving at different hours. Then Monday morning we would load up with

any personnel and head for the Island. Remember there was no phone. Communication was by wireless.

Most of the time was repetitive and uneventful. There were several trips where the whale watching was great. The unpleasant times were the personnel arriving Monday in the AM to head to work. Many of them would still be drunk from the weekend and they presented problems. On one such trip, I had a real bad time with one such drunk. He would not stay in the hold and demanded this and that. At 16 and youthful looking at that, I was somewhat at a disadvantage. Suddenly he fell off the boat. I saw him go and immediately cut the engines and turned to port to circle around where he fell, but he never came up. That was it. We stayed there for about ½ hour but there was no sign of him. He must have taken a big swallow of water when he hit and like a stone he sank.

While on the Island, there was ample time for exploration and wandering. One such trip was a near death experience. I decided to walk South from Prisoner Harbor along the very expansive beach at low tide. I was negligent and did not pay attention to my surroundings. I was too busy studying the cliffs and tide pools. Time drifted on and so did I. Suddenly I realized the tide was coming in and when I looked back the way I had come, it was too late. The waves were already crashing into the cliffs closing my way back. Soon there would be no beach. The only way was up the cliff. I was able to find a small V-shape in the cliff and I used that, without equipment. I was bare foot which was a pain. Like the rock climbers of today, I inched my way up by wedging my hand here and a foot there until I reached the top, some 30 to 40 feet from the former beach. Unlike the rock climbers of today, I dared not look down to see where I had come. It was one of the times when I really needed God and I certainly asked for his help. It was not the fault of Santa Cruz, it was my fault entirely.

Many times the farmers who lived on the Island would take some of the crew hunting, mostly for wild pig. I went once. We were driven in a WW II jeep. A very rough ride. My companions got two pigs. I do not care to kill animals so that was my last hunting trip. The pigs did BBQ up nice and that was a pleasure.

By the time of the second Summer most of the job was done and they were down to using just one LCM. My father had turned the LCVP into a pleasure yacht and it stayed at the Harbor. It became my home when I went there. My Father

had continuing work on change orders. Soon it was time for me to leave the Island, but I carried the memories until this very day. I did not return until 33 years later when I sailed my own yacht, a 33' wooden sloop, named "Friendship" into Prisoner Harbor. Dropping anchor on that occasion was very special. That was the beginning of many trips in and around the Island. My wife's tendency to sea sickness kind of put the kibosh on such trips and the boat went the way of other toys.

I was not on the Island for the finish but helped with changes. Several years later, my father returned to bid on some more work and I accompanied him. We rode in a World War 2 PT boat which was a thrill and a half. Our work there must have been well done because much of what we built that 30 plus years ago still stands today. Oh, by the way, the Adobe is no more, but we did not do it.

One last thought, if your heart yearns for leaving land to Mother Nature, then the stewardship of the Stanton family was outstanding. Yes, a pig or two went wild, but their hunting trips kept them in control. Their cattle simply kept things cut back. They did not cater to the public and preserved the Island as best as one could expect. With so many humans living just a couple of hours away it was not an easy job. It remains to be seen how the Conservancy and its bureaucracy will do. Remember, it was the Navy that caused most of the development, and that is a part of Government, the last time I checked.

Randolph Edward Siple. 2016